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ABC NEWS REVEALING JOHNSON GOVERNMENT SECRET

Network correspondents on the intelligence beat walk a fine line between informing the public and jeopardizing national security

By John Weisman

February 1983: The U.S. secretly deployed four AWACS early-warning aircraft to Egypt and made other clandestine moves in order to monitor a Libyan military buildup on the Sudanese border. ABC national-security correspondent John McWethy learned about the U.S. moves. But at the request of high-ranking Pentagon officials, who told him that if he broadcast it, American intelligence sources and methods would be compromised, McWethy sat on the story for 24 hours. "The assessment," says former State Department spokesman Alan Romberg, "is that [McWethy] perhaps helped save somebody's life."

May 1983: CBS correspondent David Martin, citing "Administration sources," reported that U.S. intelligence intercepted a series of cables sent from Tehran to Damascus: cables that implicated the government of Ayatollah Khomeini in the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in which 17 Americans died. CIA spokesman George Lauder says Martin's report "caused us to lose the manner in which the intercept was made within 10 days after the story ran."

"If that's true," says Martin, "I cost CIA a source. Not a human source, a source which I'm sure they have replaced by now. But it probably cost them some money to do it. If, in fact, that is true, then obviously that is a story I shouldn't have done."

During the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 last June, all three networks reported on the movement of Delta Force, the U.S.'s elite counterterror strike force, to the Mediterranean. Even though CBS, ABC and NBC's reporting was nonspecific, Secretary of State George Shultz and other

Administration officials accused the press of jeopardizing the hostages.

NBC correspondent Fred Francis

says that before airing his report he called "a ranking officer in the Army" for confirmation about Delta's movements. The officer, says Francis, "told me flatly . . . we'd rather you didn't [report] it, but frankly [Delta] isn't going anywhere near that plane." Francis claims U.S. intelligence knew TWA Flight 847 was going back to Beirut before Delta could stage a rescue operation at Algiers, and the press disclosures jeopardized nothing.

According to a high-ranking intelligence official, at one point during the seajacking of the Achille Lauro by PLO terrorists, CBS's David Martin gathered information for a report about "SIGINT" [signals intelligence] information on the methods we were using" to learn what was taking place aboard the ship. According to the official, CIA director William Casey placed a personal call to then-CBS News president Edward Joyce and convinced Joyce (who declined to be interviewed for this article) not to televise Martin's exclusive. (Martin says he decided independently not to broadcast the spot.)

There is a constant battle over sensitive information going on these days. In one camp are the networks, whose news operations want to inform viewers about developments within the intelligence and national-security areas. In the other are officials at the CIA, the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon.

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How
comes to reporting national-security and intelligence-based stories? A good percentage of those charged with keeping the Nation's secrets will tell you that often it is not responsible at all. "There is a lot of reporting of classified information that is damaging to us, which we don't know about until we see it on the air," says chief Pentagon spokesman Robert Sims. →

But those who cover the beat say that the Government tends to overreact when it comes to intelligence reporting, crying wolf too often to protect, not national security, but incompetence and embarrassing intelligence failures. ABC's John Scali, who has covered the national-security and intelligence beat for more than 40 years, says, "News organizations have a responsibility to help maintain the Nation's vital secrets in a world where nuclear weapons can incinerate a hemisphere. But this doesn't mean we have to stand mute and salute every time somebody demands a story be killed."

"I don't know how strong I can be on this," says NBC's Fred Francis. "They classify too much. They scream too much about what they read in the papers or see on television, when in fact most of what they see or read has already been published before, or reported in testimony before some Senate committee."

As evidence, Francis cites a two-part report he did in January 1985 on the Pentagon's special-operations forces. He and his producer, Bob Windrem, came across an article in the periodical Naval Proceedings that reported about two nuclear submarines, the John Marshall and the Sam Houston, which were being converted by the Navy for special-operations commando use..

Francis says when he went to the Navy to ask about the program, which had also been discussed on Capitol Hill, he was told it was classified. "I said, 'Nah, guys, it's not classified. Look at May 1984 Naval Proceedings.' But they refused to talk about it. Well, the day they refused, we were flying over the two submarines on the West Coast, filming them."

Mark Brender, a former Naval officer who is the Washington national-security assignment editor for ABC News, cites another example. "I'm dealing with the USS Samuel Reyburn, which, under the SALT agreement, is now dismantled—its hatches are lying open and the missiles are out. The sub is sitting at the Charleston, South Carolina, Naval Shipyard right now—sitting in the water alongside a pier, no tent

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